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Visual Culture in Prehistoric South-east Italy

By ROBIN SKEATES[1]

Using the approach of visual culture, which highlights the embeddedness of art in dynamic human processes, this paper examines the prehistoric archaeology of the Lecce province in south-east Italy, in order to provide a history of successive visual cultures in that area, between the Middle Palaeolithic and the Bronze Age. It is argued that art may have helped human groups to deal with problems in subsistence and society, including environmental changes affecting the cultural landscape and its resources, the breaking up of old social relations and the establishment and maintenance of new ones. More specifically, art appears to have become increasingly related to the expression of religious and even mythical beliefs, and in particular to the performance of ceremonies and rituals in selected spaces such as caves. This may reflect the existence of a long-term tradition of performance art in prehistory, involving performers and viewers, in which art helped to structure and heighten the sensual and social impact of the acting human body.

TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF VISUAL CULTURE

The main aim of this paper is to promote archaeological interest in the study and approach of 'visual culture', with its emphasis on the social dynamics of visual communication. This is an area closely related to the study of 'art', which can be broadly defined as those made objects that are intended to be visually expressive and stimulating. The term 'visual culture', which has recently gained widespread (although not total) interdisciplinary acceptance, usefully complements and broadens this definition with the belief that such objects also comprise an integral part of the mental and cultural processes through which people construct themselves (see, for example: Alpers *et al.* 1996; Walker & Chaplin 1997; Rogoff 1998; Mirzoeff 1999). In doing so, 'visual culture' highlights not only the manufactured ('artefactual') nature of art, but also its embeddedness in dynamic human processes.

This approach deserves to be better-known by archaeologists. On the one hand, it has the potential to enhance traditional archaeological approaches to the history of art, including the study of prehistoric art in terms of its technical production, style, iconography, siting, spatial distribution, relative age, archaeological culture, and evolution (eg, Graziosi 1973). On the other hand, it is clear that visual culture studies share much in common with contemporary 'contextual' and 'interpretative' archaeological approaches to the symbolic and structural meanings of material culture (eg, Hodder 1982; 1986, 118–46; Thomas 1993; Tilley 1998). The almost unbounded range of manufactured material studied by these contemporary approaches is comparable. Together, they emphasise the centrality and embeddedness of the material and the visual in cultural processes, within which art objects are seen to participate actively in the production, reproduction, and transformation of social values, meanings, and relations. They share a tendency to apply a model of production, distribution, and consumption to the study of material and visual culture, at the same time as trying to pin down the unstable meanings of signs with reference to their historical, spatial, and social contexts. They share a contemporary interest in phenomenology, and in the structured and structuring role of material culture and art in the practical and routine experiences of daily life. They both recognise the importance of individual perception, and are interested in the politics of spectatorship. They share a self-critical and politicised interest in deconstructing the history of scientific thought and its particular ways of seeing. They also share a concern over our

[1]Department of Archaeology, University of Durham, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE
robin.skeates@durham.ac.uk

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limitations to appreciate fully those images produced by cultural groups to which we do not belong. In this way, visual culture studies offer a useful interdisciplinary arena within which different archaeologies of art can be consolidated (Skeates 2001).

That is not to say that visual culture studies do not carry their own share of problems. In particular, by focusing attention on ways of seeing, visual culture studies have been accused of excluding the other human senses (touch, smell, and hearing), which also contribute to the way that art works. But, for archaeologists at least, these senses are generally much less accessible than that of sight. Also, the very term 'visual culture' is rejected by some scholars, who feel that a redefinition of the traditional term 'art' will suffice in signalling its cultural embeddedness. From an archaeological perspective, however, 'art' has often proved a problematic term (being ill-defined and consequently confined to inverted commas), whereas 'visual culture' should work well as a term that complements the well-established term 'material culture'.

PREHISTORIC VISUAL CULTURES IN THE LECCE PROVINCE

A further aim of this paper is to apply the approach of visual culture to a relatively local but long-term case study within Central Mediterranean prehistory. For this, I have chosen to return to the prehistoric archaeology of the Lecce province, which extends over the Salento peninsula in south-east Italy (cf. Skeates 1994) (Fig. 1). The relatively small geographical scale of this study is intentional, in that some previous interpretative syntheses of the prehistoric art of the south-central Mediterranean suffer slightly – in my opinion – from trying to base ambitious interpretations on insufficiently contextualised accounts of data drawn from too broad a region (eg, Zampetti & Mussi 1991; Whitehouse 1992; Pluciennik 1994; Robb 1997; Giannitrapani 1998). It is also intended to serve as a pilot-study for a broader work that will deal with the whole of south-east Italy, including its relations with neighbouring regions and broader cultural patterns.

The limited quality of the available archaeological evidence does not help matters. For example, most 'portable' examples of prehistoric art from the Lecce province were found as a result of old trench excavations in caves made between 1904 and 1970, whilst all of the 'parietal' examples remain poorly dated. Furthermore, few radiocarbon determinations have been made on archaeological remains from sites in this area, which means that it is still necessary to rely heavily on relative dating and traditional phasing in order to provide a chronological framework for the art. These problems make detailed contextualisation and interpretation difficult.

Bearing these constraints in mind, I attempt below to outline the history of successive visual cultures in the Lecce province, combining patterns in the available archaeological data with some tentative general interpretations.

Middle Palaeolithic

My study begins with the Middle Palaeolithic (or 'Mousterian') phase, which continues until around 35,000 BP (cf. Alessio *et al.* 1978, 90). It was during this phase that the Salento peninsula was occupied for the first time, by mobile and flexible Neanderthal groups who appear to have subsisted on scavenging, hunting, and foraging (Milliken 1999–2000). Archaeological deposits dating to this period are found at open sites, such as the limestone depression at Santa Caterina near Nardò, and in numerous cave sites (ranging from small fissures and rock-shelters to sink-holes to large caverns), such as the Grotta del Cavallo and neighbouring caves near Nardò (see, for example, Borzatti von Löwenstern 1966; Palma di Cesnola & Messeri 1967, 249–51; Sarti 1998). These deposits often contain traces of 'hearths', whose functions may have ranged from heat-sources to defence from predators to cooking installations. They also contain the bones of large game animals (including wild horse, wild ass, aurochs, red deer, and even rhinoceros), various medium and small animal species and fish, and the shells of a wide range of edible molluscs. The teeth of Neanderthal adults and children have also been found occasionally. These are accompanied by assemblages of flaked 'Mousterian' artefacts, made on flint, limestone and even shell, which evolve from an earlier 'Micoquian' to a later 'Quinsonian' facies, with the latter characterised, for example, by sharp points.

A couple of incised objects belong to this cultural context, which are claimed to be early examples of

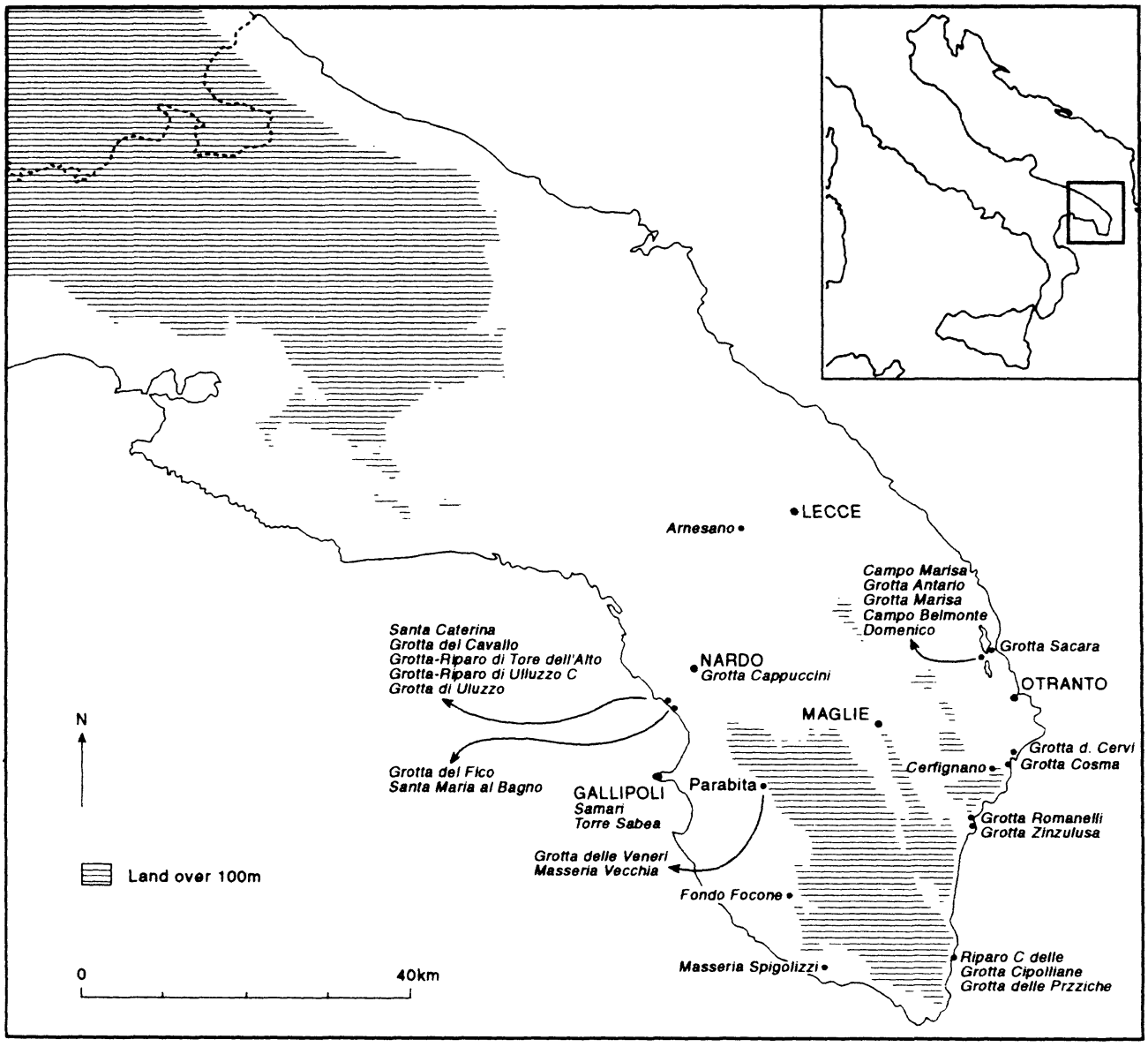

Fig. 1
Map of sites mentioned in the text. (Drawn by Yvonne Beadnell)

art. They comprise two pebbles with random incisions found in Stratum C of the Grotta-Riparo di Torre dell'Alto near Nardò (Borzatti von Löwenstern & Magaldi 1967, 209–11), and the astragalus of an aurochs with a group of intersecting incisions covering half of one side from Stratum G of the Grotta-Riparo di Uluzzo C near Nardò (Borzatti von Löwenstern & Magaldi 1969, 26). These marks seem rather unconvincing as examples of intentionally produced art, particularly due to their extreme rarity (despite the large number of Mousterian sites now excavated in the province), and the possibility that they could have been produced unintentionally as a consequence of subsistence tasks, such as the cutting of meat from an animal bone (cf. Milliken 1999–2000, 62–3).

That is not to suggest that Neanderthal groups in the Middle Palaeolithic did not share a visual culture

in a general sense. Their assemblages of stone and shell artefacts, for example, conform to a recognisably 'Mousterian' repertoire of technological processes and tool types, which must have depended upon a culturally transmitted mental template, both for its maintenance and for its development. The caves that these groups re-used over successive generations, as camp-sites and as places of social and economic interaction, *may* also have contributed, as permanent visual and conceptual reference points in the landscape, to the cultural construction of the natural environment that they lived in and exploited. Their bodies, as vehicles of expression and communication, would also have acted as important visual stimuli. However, there is no convincing evidence that these groups significantly modified and extended their material culture – to any archaeologically visible extent – into the more specialised realm of art objects intended to be visually expressive and stimulating.

Early Upper Palaeolithic

The Early Upper Palaeolithic (or 'Aurignacian' and 'Uluzzian') phase follows, between around 35,000 BP and 29,000 BP (cf. Alessio *et al.* 1970, 605–6). This phase remains poorly understood, to the extent that it is still unclear as to whether its archaeological remains should be credited to the first modern humans or to the last Neanderthals in Italy, of which the latter could have evolved culturally either independently or through contact with the first modern humans (Milliken 1999–2000, 64–8). Archaeological deposits in the Lecce province again comprise open sites, represented by surface-finds of stone artefacts, and cave sites, such as the Grotta-Riparo di Uluzzo C and neighbouring caves near Nardò (see, for example, Borzatti von Löwenstern 1965a; Borzatti von Löwenstern & Magaldi 1969). The contents of the deposits appear to remain broadly the same as in the previous phase, with traces of 'hearths', a similar range of faunal and molluscan remains, and occasional children's teeth. Assemblages of stone artefacts also exhibit a continued evolution, into the 'Aurignacian' and 'Uluzzian' styles. The latter is characterised, for example, by an expanded range of tool types, including truncated blades and bladelets, backed points and blades, and semi-lunate points.

In contrast, bone points comprise an element of novelty. So too do a few unequivocal elements of body decoration. These take the form of some perforated shells (especially of *Cyclonassa neritea* and of *Columbella rustica*), found in Stratum D of the Grotta del Cavallo near Nardò (Palma di Cesnola 1966, 31). Fragments of red ochre, which could have been procured and used as a pigment (as well as a tanning agent), were also recovered from Strata E and D of the Grotta del Cavallo, and (as a single specimen) from Level N of the Grotta di Uluzzo near Nardò (Palma di Cesnola 1965, 60; Palma di Cesnola 1966, 17, 31; Borzatti von Löwenstern 1963, 78).

Overall, it appears that the visual culture of the Middle Palaeolithic was maintained and evolved by groups in the Early Upper Palaeolithic, to judge from their apparently similar archaeological deposits and elaborated assemblages of stone artefacts. But, at the same time, the new – if small-scale – use of ornaments and of a coloured mineral does seem to be significant. By decorating people's bodies, the shell ornaments (and perhaps also the ochre) may have culturally reinforced the human body as a primary vehicle and focus for visual expression and social communication. In doing so, these objects *may* have established a new visual medium of body art. If this was so, then one explanation might be that this new art-form was used by members of more communicative Early Upper Palaeolithic groups throughout Europe (cf. Mithen 1996), who sought greater bodily expression, perhaps especially in performative contexts such as hunting and in any associated ritual.

Middle and Late Upper Palaeolithic

The next phase comprises the Middle Upper Palaeolithic (or 'Gravettian'), dated to between around 29,000 BP and 20,000 BP, and the Late Upper Palaeolithic (or 'Epigravettian'), dated to between around 20,000 BP and 11,000 BP (for the latter, cf. Alessio *et al.* 1967, 359; 1976, 333; 1978, 89). The Late Upper Palaeolithic period coincided with the gradual transformation of the natural environment between the last glacial maximum and the beginning of the post-glacial phase, with mixed deciduous woodland beginning to replace open steppe vegetation, and a reduction in the extent of the Adriatic coastal plain by at least 50% (Milliken 1998). These changes would have influenced the availability of subsistence resources, and although the coastal plain may have remained sufficiently productive to support semi-sedentary hunting bands throughout the year before 15,000 BP, after that date

the fragmented plain would no longer have been capable of supporting large migratory herds of game animals (ibid., 278).

Open sites and cave sites (such as the Riparo C delle Grotte Cipolliane near Novaglie) continue to occur in the Lecce province (see, for example, Palma di Cesnola 1962, 3–34; Gambassini 1970). And the contents of these deposits again contain traces of 'hearths', and a broadly similar range of animal bones and stone tool types. But they also exhibit changes. Mollusc shells temporarily disappear from the archaeological record. Lithic assemblages continued to evolve, from 'Late Gravettian', to 'Final Gravettian', 'Epigravettian', 'Final Epigravettian', and 'Protoromanellian', with these different styles characterised, for example, by changing frequencies of tool sizes and types (notably amongst the backed pieces, burins, end-scrapers, and points). Bone artefacts, such as awls and projectile points, also appear in greater numbers in the archaeological record.

Changes also appeared in other aspects of the visual culture of the Upper Palaeolithic, especially in its Late (or 'Epigravettian') phase. For example, a red ochre burial was placed at the back of the Grotta delle Veneri near Parabita (Cremonesi *et al.* 1972). This deposit, in Stratum D, comprised the disturbed skeletal remains of two adult individuals, aged between around 30 and 35 years, one possibly male the other possibly female. They lay in a trench dug into a natural depression in the bedrock of the cave, and were accompanied by a group of 29 perforated deer canines. The latter, which were naturally polished, were found in two superimposed lines close to the head area of one of the skeletons, suggesting that they were suspended from strings if not also worn as necklaces. They were also closely associated with a large quantity of red ochre. This was found throughout the soil deposit in which the skeletons lay, and coated both a pebble placed close to the pelvis of the second skeleton and a large flint blade.

Elsewhere at this site (from a poorly specified context thought by the excavators to be broadly contemporary with the burial) a pair of female figurines were found (Radmilli 1966a; Grifoni Cremonesi 1997) (Fig. 2). They measure 90 and 61 mm in length, and are carved from the long bones of large animals (possibly aurochs or horse). They are three-dimensional sculptures, carved on the front, back, and sides, and they represent female bodies.

Fig. 2
Late Upper Palaeolithic bone figurine from the Grotta delle Veneri (three views). After Grziosi (1973, fig. 6a)

Features on each of them include a head, a pair of grooves around the lower part of the face (thought by some to represent necklaces), breasts, long arms that join together under a protruding stomach, buttocks, and thighs. Two flakes of bone with regularly incised notches can also be assigned to this chronological phase. One, from the upper part of Stratum D of the Grotta delle Veneri, carries three deep parallel grooves (Cremonesi *et al.* 1972, 109). The other, from Fondo Focone near Ugento, has notches arranged in columns (Cardini 1965, 147). Seven incised pieces of limestone were also found at Fondo Focone, one of which was painted with red ochre. The most artistically sophisticated example is a fragment of limestone, 200 mm long and 70 mm wide, whose flat face is covered by deeply incised zigzag lines delimited by two bands of parallel lines (Cardini 1965, 147). Three fragments of incised stalagtite carrying clear traces of red ochre were also found at this site (Segre Naldini & Biddittu 1992).

Taken together, these visual elements of the Middle and Late Upper Palaeolithic suggest both continuity and significant change with respect to the visual

culture of the preceding Early Upper Palaeolithic. The stone artefacts exhibit a gradual stylistic evolution over time. But the bone artefacts comprise increasingly important elements of material and visual culture, used for special-purposes, as work tools, weapons, ornaments, and as abstract and figurative art objects. These are complemented by intentionally incised pieces of stone and stalagmite. The human body also appears to have played an even more visible and important role as a key vehicle and focus for visual expression, particularly in the interior of the Grotta delle Veneri. In life, a pair of female bodies was represented in bone, possibly as pregnant, and later deposited in the cave. And, in death, a pair of corpses (possibly male and female) was intentionally buried in the same cave, in a mortuary deposit in which the bodies formed the unifying element of a highly visible assemblage of inanimate but symbolically-charged objects, all coated with red ochre. One explanation for these developments (and for the Grotta delle Venere figurines and mortuary deposits in particular) *might* be that ritual performances, particularly in ancestral cave-sites, now made increasing use of structured visual culture to focus the attention of participants on growing concerns about presumably fundamental biological and social problems faced by their groups, such as fertility and death.

Final Upper Palaeolithic

The following phases comprise the Final Upper Palaeolithic (or 'Romanellian'), dated to between around 11,000 cal BC and 9,000 cal BC (11,000 BP and 9700 BP), and a possible Mesolithic (or 'Epi-Romanellian'), lying between around 9000 cal BC and 5850 cal BC (9700 BP and 7000 BP) (cf. Bella *et al.* 1958–61, 94; Vogel & Waterbolk 1963, 170; Alessio *et al.* 1964, 79–80; 1965, 218; and see comments by Pluciennik 1997, 118; 2000). This period saw a temporary return of a cold and arid climate (the Younger Dryas event) accompanied by steppe vegetation, then the continued development of mild and humid climatic conditions leading to an expansion of mixed deciduous woodland, and a further rise in the Adriatic sea-level and consequent submergence of the coastal plain (Shackleton *et al.* 1984; Milliken 1998). Under these conditions, human groups diversified and possibly specialised their settlement and subsistence strategies. Contemporary archaeological deposits found in the Lecce province again comprise open sites (such as Masseria Paiarone and Campo Marisa by the Alimini lakes near Otranto), and cave sites (such as Grotta Romanelli near Castro) (see, for example, Stasi & Regàlia 1904; Regàlia & Stasi 1905; Piccinno & Piccinno 1978; Milliken & Skeates 1989). These deposits continue to be broadly characterised by hearths and dark-brown, charcoal-rich, soils. Faunal remains found in them still reflect a fairly wide range of species and sizes of hunted animals, although the frequency of wild ass bones (*Equus Asinus hydruntinus*) now decreases, probably in response to the fragmentation and submergence of its favoured coastal plain habitat. By contrast, the shells of a wide range of edible marine and terrestrial molluscs are now found in large and increasing quantities, and quite literally in piles at the Grotta del Cavallo. Assemblages of stone artefacts also exhibit stylistic developments, being characterised by microlithic-sized pieces, distinctive circular end-scrapers, and the appearance of special-purpose awls. These continued to be accompanied by a specialised range of bone artefacts.

Other elements of visual culture, less directly employed in subsistence activities, likewise exhibit a combination of continuity and significant developments, although evidence is restricted exclusively to the Final Upper Palaeolithic 'Romanellian' phase. These elements include human remains, animal bones and mollusc shells, red ochre, and incised stones and cave walls.

Poorly documented human remains continued to be deposited in caves, perhaps especially in a disarticulated state. Examples come from Grotta Romanelli, Grotta Antonio by the Alimini lakes, and Stratum B of the Grotta del Cavallo (Blanc *et al.* 1958–61, 305; Piccinno & Piccinno 1978, 126–9; Palma di Cesnola 1963, 58).

The apparently articulated remains of a horse were found in one of the entrance chambers (A) of the Grotta dei Cervi near Porto Badisco, perhaps having been placed there as a sacrifice; and incised bones were also found in this cave (Guerri 1993, 270). At least 12 animal bones incised with geometric motifs were also found at Grotta Marisa near Otranto, and another two come from Grotta Romanelli (Stasi & Regàlia 1904, 28; Cremonesi 1992, 313). Shells and deer's teeth also continued to be used as suspended ornaments. Perforated shells were found in a relatively large quantity in Levels G, F, and E of the Grotta di Uluzzo (ie, 17 examples made of *Columbella rustica*

and *Cyclonassa neritea*), and also in Stratum B of the Grotta del Cavallo and in the Grotta dei Cervi (Borzatti von Löwenstern 1963, 84–6; 1964, 42–3; Palma di Cesnola 1963, 58; Guerri 1985–6, 386). Single examples of perforated deer's teeth were also found in Level G of the Grotta di Uluzzo and Stratum B of the Grotta del Cavallo (Borzatti von Löwenstern 1963, 82; Palma di Cesnola 1963, 58).

Red ochre continued to be ground-up and used as a pigment. For example, over four pieces of this mineral, as well as a slab of limestone tinted with it (possibly used as a grindstone), were found in the Grotta di Uluzzo (Borzatti von Löwenstern 1963, 82). It also continued to be applied as a coating to certain objects, as in the Grotta dei Cervi and Grotta Marisa where traces of ochre were identified on some limestone pebbles (Guerri 1985–6, 386; Cremonesi 1992, 313). But notably, and for the first time, red ochre was also applied more carefully in painted patterns to selected objects. For example, a fragment of limestone from Grotta Romanelli is painted with five parallel rows of 'comb-shaped' motifs, comprising groups two or three vertical lines joined by a horizontal line (Graziosi 1973, 36–7). The slightly convex side of a piece of bone from the Grotta delle Prazziche near Leuca is also painted with nine circular spots (Borzatti von Löwenstern 1965b). This bone measures 50 mm in length, and comprises a water-smoothed fragment of the diaphysis of the limb of either an aurochs or a horse.

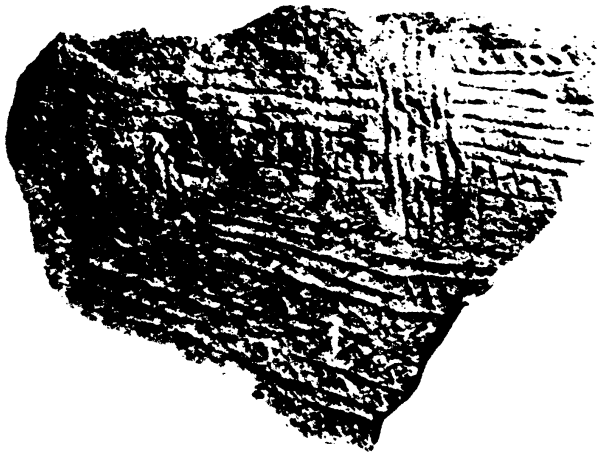

Fig. 3
Final Upper Palaeolithic incised stone with 'linear-geometric' motif from Grotta Romanelli. After Graziosi (1973, fig. 25)

Incised stones also continued to be deposited in caves in this phase, but in far greater quantities. Three hundred and eighty-nine examples come from the Grotta delle Veneri, 110 from the Grotta Romanelli, 28 from the Grotta del Cavallo, an unspecified quantity from the Grotta dei Cervi, one from Grotta Marisa, two from Grotta Sacara by the Alimini lakes, and single examples from the Grotta delle Prazziche, Grotta-Riparo di Uluzzo C, and Riparo C delle Grotte Cipolliane (see, for example, Borzatti von Löwenstern 1962; 1965b; Acanfora 1967; Palma di Cesnola 1972; Vigliardi 1972; Cremonesi 1992; Guerri 1992; Martini 1992; Martini & Frediani 1997; Possenti 1997). Many of these were found in disturbed deposits. However, all of the securely provenanced examples do come from Romanellian deposits, while all of the others come from sites with disturbed Romanellian deposits, and so it seems valid to assign all of them to that phase.

Stylistically, these stones exhibit an increased range of motifs, which are further complicated by superimposed incisions of different depths, applied to one or both sides of the slabs and pebbles. On one stone from the Grotta del Cavallo, for example, at least four strata of superimpositions were identified (Vigliardi 1972). The motifs are predominantly 'linear-geometric' in appearance, but are occasionally combined with naturalistic figures. The former are composed of various lines (straight, curving, zigzag, broken, short), combined to form somewhat disorderly linear bands of varying widths, that sometimes converge or intersect to form geometric motifs, such as rectangles, squares, chevrons, ladders, and lattices (Fig. 3). Amongst these, some 'ribbon-shaped' examples from Grotta Romanelli, with 'fringes' and 'knots', have been interpreted as abstract squeomorphic representations of intertwined strings netting the stones (Graziosi 1973, 36). A few naturalistic figures of large game animals also appear, including seven examples from Grotta Romanelli. These are outlined, minimally but carefully, in profile, sometimes with the addition of head features (horns, ear, eye, mouth, and mane), and then filled with hatching, lattice and chequer patterns (Fig. 4). They have been interpreted as representing contemporary large game animals, including aurochs, horse, deer, a feline, and a boar. A possible, but very schematic, human figure may also be represented on a stone from the Grotta del Cavallo, with a foot, two legs, a

Fig. 4
Final Upper Palaeolithic incised outline of an animal on a wall in Grotta Romanelli. After Graziosi (1973, fig. 76a)

phallus, a long straight tunic, two arms, and a head.

'Parietal' art, produced in a style very similar to these incised stones (and therefore probably contemporary with them) has also been found on the walls of two caves. In Grotta Romanelli, incisions were identified on the cave walls and ceiling, including geometric-linear motifs, some 'spindle-shaped' motifs, and the semi-naturalistic outline of a bovid (Regàlia & Stasi 1905, 171–2; Graziosi 1973, 56–7). And in the Grotta dei Cervi, finger-impressed lines, red painted stripes, and incisions forming geometric motifs and a few naturalistic representations of animals (probably of an ibex and a bovid) were found in one of the interior corridors, including over a 2.32 m length of wall (Guerri 1987–8a, 385; 1989–90, 364; 1992).

Considered together, these elements of Romanellian visual culture add up to something of a florescence of Palaeolithic art in south-east Italy. On the one hand, they exhibit a fundamental continuity with the visual culture of the preceding Middle and Late phases of the Upper Palaeolithic, in terms of their broadly similar archaeological deposits, range of animal species and artefact types, and highlighting of the human body through ornaments, red ochre, artistic representations, and mortuary deposits. On the other hand, significant changes are also evident. In the subsistence economy, big game hunting was now accompanied by the more specialised exploitation of molluscs and a distinctive microlithic toolkit, and based at aggregation sites located along the coast where rich seasonal resources could be exploited throughout much of the year. And in art, there appears to have been a widespread explosion in the scale of visual expression, particularly in cave sites, where abstract and occasional naturalistic representations were increasingly mobilised.

These patterns might again be interpreted in terms of a continued and growing use of art, particularly in ritual performances in ancestral cave-sites, to focus attention on growing concerns about biological and social issues – such as mortality and identity – faced by 'complex' hunter-gatherer groups in the Lecce province and beyond. But there also appears to have been an increased and, in some cases, quite explicit visual emphasis upon large game animals. This might be understood within the context of the contemporary natural world, in which rising sea levels led to the gradual but notable submergence of parts of the Adriatic coastal plain, and to a consequent reduction in numbers of migratory large game animals such as the ass, which in turn necessitated a certain re-orientation of traditional subsistence-related practices. Romanellian art, and its repeated production and consumption, may then reflect a dynamic culture's attempt to understand and cope with this changing world, particularly through ritual performance. Its widely adopted iconographic style may also represent an attempt to express and maintain connections between mutually dependent but dispersed social groups, especially at a time of increasing sedentism and separation.

Earlier Neolithic

The Earlier Neolithic phase is dated to between around 5850 cal BC and 4800 cal BC (7000 BP and 5850 BP) (cf. Azzi & Gulisano 1979, 354; Costantini & Stancanelli 1994, 202). This phase is characterised as a key period of transition, in which early agricultural resources and practices made their first appearance in the region, as a result of either demic or stimulus diffusion (Ammerman & Cavalli Sforza 1971). Archaeological deposits found in the Lecce province continue to be located in coastal areas similar to those in which Final Upper Palaeolithic sites are found, and they also comprise open sites (such as Samari and Torre Sabea near Gallipoli) and cave sites (such as the Grotta delle Prazziche near Leuca) (see

for example, Cremonesi 1985–6, 424–5; Cremonesi *et al.* 1987; Borzatti von Löwenstern 1965c; 1969). Stratigraphic and cultural continuity between the Romanellian and the Neolithic has even been claimed in relation to the contents of Strata C and B in the Grotta delle Prazziche (Borzatti von Löwenstern 1969). However, the character of the archaeological deposits at all of these sites does change somewhat. At the open sites, relatively dense accumulations of stones, dark soil and ashes are accompanied by numerous combustion structures (including fire-pits and hearths) and a range of post-holes, pits, channels, and ditches. And at the cave sites numerous pits now cut into the underlying deposits. In the interior part of the Grotta delle Veneri, for example, eight small pits were found, measuring between 0.5 and 0.6 m in diameter and between 0.6 and 0.8 m in depth (Radmilli 1966b, 421; Cremonesi *et al.* 1972; Ventura 1997). They were plausibly interpreted by the excavators as having been dug for ritual purposes, with regard for their contents, amongst which there were fragments of decorated pottery and faunal remains, including the articulated leg bones of a cow. Human mortuary deposits were also discovered at Samari. Despite being disturbed by later pit-digging, it is evident that these comprised both articulated human remains, represented in particular by a crouched skeleton surrounded by three large stones, and dis-articulated remains, including a pile of bones belonging to more than one individual.

Subsistence-related material remains also exhibit both continuity and change. Faunal remains comprised a more restricted range of wild species (such as deer, fox, otter, tortoise, fish, and molluscs), as well as the new domesticated species (sheep, goat, cattle, and pig). Domesticated animal bones were more frequent at the open site of Torre Sabea, whereas wild animal bones predominated at the cave sites, and at the Grotta di Uluzzo there was a further increase and concentration upon marine molluscs. Grains of domesticated wheat and barley (including *Triticum dicoccum*, *Triticum monococcum*, and *Hordeum vulgare*) were also found at Torre Sabea and in the Grotta dei Cervi, sometimes in sizeable carbonised deposits. Stone artefacts appear to reflect the character of this subsistence economy, with, on the one hand, a continuation of Romanellian elements (such as trapezoidal geometrics, backed points and blades, and a high proportion of end-scrapers), and, on the other hand, the new or at least significantly increased appearance of retouched blades, ground-stone axe blades, grindstones, and obsidian blades and bladelets.

The same pattern can be traced in other elements of material culture. A similar range of bone artefacts continued to be used and deposited (including bone awls, spatulae, and a pendant). So too did fragments of red ochre and perforated shell pendants. However, new types of ornament also appeared, including a bracelet made from a *Pectunculus* shell and a pendant of calcite, both from Torre Sabea (Cremonesi *et al.* 1987, 382). New sherds of plain and decorated pottery also appear now at all sites, often highly fragmented and sometimes in large quantities. Their decoration can be divided into three main types: 'evolved' Cardial Impressed Ware, covered with a wide variety of impressions; 'graffiti' incised fine-ware, ornamented with geometric motifs formed by parallel or intersecting groups of lines (including a stylised face on a rim-sherd from the Grotta delle Venere); and light-coloured *figulina*, sometimes painted with simple red or brown bands (Fig. 5).

Overall, the material and visual culture of the earliest Neolithic exhibits both significant continuity and significant change compared to that of the preceding Romanellian phase. Continuity can be seen in: the continued occupation of certain cave sites; mortuary practices; the hunting of wild game and the specialised gathering of molluscs, complemented by a fundamentally Romanellian style tool kit made on stone and bone; animal sacrifice; the use of perforated shell and bone ornaments; the use of red ochre; and the application of incised and painted geometric motifs to artefacts. However, the practice of incising stones and cave walls, which comprised the most distinctive aspect of Romanellian art, was now discontinued. And new visual elements also appear, in the form of: a range of excavated features and associated special deposits, the remains of domesticated species of animals and plants accompanied by new types of stone tool used to produce and process them, burnt deposits of cereals, ornaments of *Pectunculus* shell and calcite, and both plain and decorated pottery vessels used for storage and serving.

What these developments represent remains the subject of major debate (for a summary of the major positions see Donahue 1992). My own view is that there was some basic cultural continuity between the Romanellian and the earliest Neolithic phases in the Lecce province (even if the Salento became virtually

Fig. 5
Earlier Neolithic Cardial Impressed Ware from Torre Sabea (with centimetre scale). After Cremonesi *et al.* (1987, fig. 4)

deserted during the Mesolithic phase). I also believe that the developments of the earliest Neolithic represent a growth in social and economic interaction between small groups of people situated around the southern part of the Adriatic Sea, one archaeologically-visible aspect of which involved the transmission and adoption of exotic domesticated subsistence resources and of new beliefs, practices and equipment associated with them (Skeates 2000, 170–2). The material and visual culture of the earliest Neolithic, which maintains some traditional elements, rejects others and incorporates new ones, may reflect such cultural developments. It may also have played an active, if subtle, part in them. For example, the widespread adoption of relatively durable and visible ceramic food storage and serving vessels, locally produced and decorated in a style widely shared throughout the southern Adriatic region, *may* have helped members of possibly more sedentary agricultural communities to express and maintain a vital network of social and subsistence-related connections. More specifically, these vessels may also have highlighted, practically and visually, the social and economic importance of food sharing, both within and between the earliest farming communities, particularly during ceremonies and ritual performances.

Later Neolithic and Early Copper Age

The following Later Neolithic and Early Copper Age phase can be assigned to a period between around 4800 cal BC and 3700 cal BC. This phase is characterised by growing socio-economic interaction, exchange, and differentiation within and between human groups. Archaeological deposits found in the Lecce province now expand in distribution and range, spreading inland to upland areas, and comprising not only open sites (such as Campo Belmonte Domenico by the coastal Alimini lakes, and Cerfignano in the coastal hills near Santa Cesarea Terme) and cave sites (such as Stratum 2 of the Grotta del Fico near Nardò and the Grotta dei Cervi near Porto Badisco), but also a new special-purpose rock-cut tomb (at Arnesano near Monteroni) (see, for example, Palma di Cesnola & Minellono 1961; Graziosi 1970, 43; 1980; Lo Porto 1972; Piccinno & Piccinno 1978, 130–1; Cremonesi 1984, 387; Revedin 1985–6, 425–6; Whitehouse 1992, 87–124).

Portable elements of material and visual culture were also elaborated at this time. For example, familiar faunal remains, and stone and bone artefacts continue to occur, but with increased quantities of imported obsidian, ground-stone axe blades, and occasional new arrowheads, long blades, and daggers. Finewares evolved stylistically, with graffiti-incised dark burnished ware decorated by a range of white-filled geometric motifs, and *figulina* bowls and flasks decorated in the 'Serra d'Alto', 'Diana' and 'Piano Conte' styles (characterised by red, brown, and black bichrome and trichrome painting, red monochrome slips, spool handles, carinated bowls, pottery strainers, and miniature bowls). Clay spindle whorls make their first appearance. So too do ceramic *pintaderas*, interpreted as decorative stamps used to apply paint in standardised motifs to human bodies. Examples of these found in the Lecce province include those from Campo Belmonte Domenico and the

Grotta dei Cervi (Piccinno & Piccinno 1978, 130–1; Graziosi 1980, 111; cf. Cornaggia Castiglione 1956). They measure between 55 and 70 mm in height, and between 40 and 50 mm in diameter at the base, and are decorated with cruciform and spiral motifs. Perforated bone and shell pendants continued to be worn, together with new exotic elements made of two fossil shark's teeth and a bauxite nodule, both found at Cerfignano (unpublished material in Lecce Museum). Pieces of ochre and two pebbles with traces of red ochre can also be assigned to this phase.

Deposits in coastal cave sites appear to be more overtly ritual. In the Grotta dei Cervi, for example, they include hearths, pits, piles of burnt cereals, broken pottery vessels, abundant animal bones, human remains, short sections of dry-stone walling, and – most remarkably – numerous wall paintings made of brown bat guano and red ochre (Graziosi 1972; 1973, 136–46; 1980; Cipriani & Magaldi 1979; Albert 1982; Guerri 1987–8a; Whitehouse 1992, 87–124) (Fig. 6). These paintings, similar examples of which were also found in the neighbouring Grotta Cosma (Guerri 1987–8b), comprise a combination of schematic figurative motifs and deer hunting scenes (including representations of supernatural figures, women, men, animals, bows and arrows, and hand-prints), and abstract geometric symbols (including cruciforms, stelliforms, spirals, and zigzags). A degree of spatial patterning can also be seen in these motifs, which become increasingly abstract the deeper one goes into the extensive cave system. By contrast, in Grotta Zinzulusa, a group of 11 'Piano Conte' style jars and bowls appear to have been ritually deposited along the edge of a small lake (Zezza 1984).

Fig. 6
Later Neolithic–Early Copper Age wall paintings in the Grotta dei Cervi. After Graziosi (1973, fig. 163a)

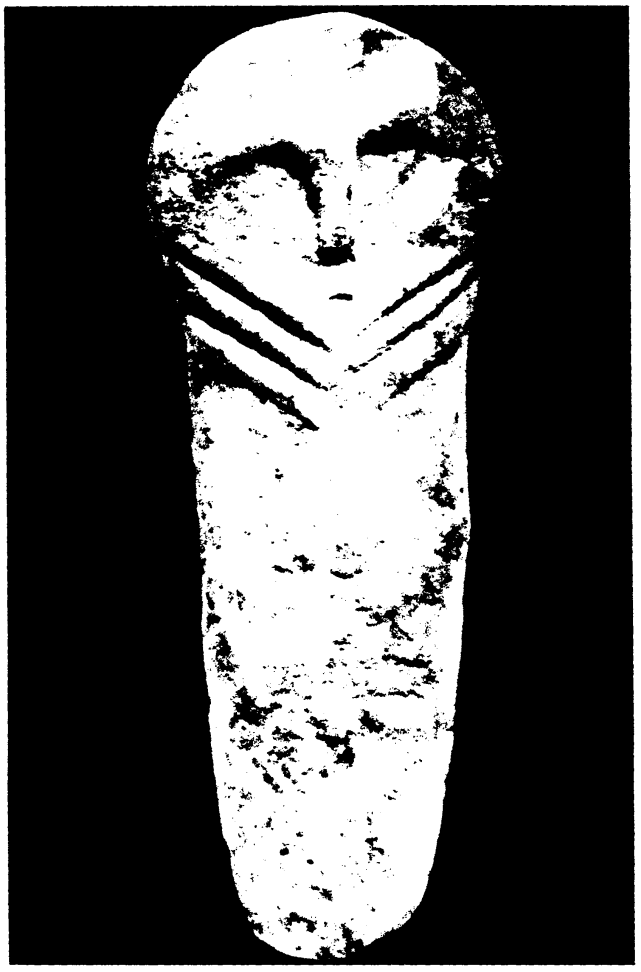

Fig. 7
Later Neolithic–Early Copper Age stone 'idol' from Arnesano. After Graziosi (1973, fig. 124)

The rock-cut tomb at Arnesano is also special (Lo Porto 1972). A shaft sealed by a limestone slab provided access to its 'oven-shaped' chamber. It contained a crouched skeleton, possibly of a young adult, which was accompanied by three 'Diana-Bellavista' style pottery vessels, and a stone 'idol'. The latter was made of a 350 mm long piece of local limestone, ground into a tapering cylindrical form, which might be regarded as phallic. A human head is also represented at the broadest end by eyes, a nose, and a mouth, together with three deep grooves on the neck, which might represent necklaces (Fig. 7).

Overall, this period saw a significant elaboration of the visual culture of the Neolithic. Continuity is certainly present in those traditional elements of

material and visual culture most closely related to subsistence requirements (including the majority of flint and bone artefacts, food remains, and some ceramic types) and in aspects of bodily display (including the shell and bone pendants and the red ochre). But in other respects transformations are marked. Selected cave sites were elaborated visually by wall paintings and overtly ritual deposits. Portable items of material culture were elaborated visually, in terms of their: size (eg, the long flint blades and miniature vessels), form (eg, the weapons, sharks' teeth pendants, carinated vessels, and spool handles), exotic materials (eg, the sharks' teeth, bauxite, and increased quantity of dark and translucent obsidian), surface decoration (eg, the trichrome painting, white-filled incisions, and polished red slips), and symbols (eg, the abstract spirals, schematic hunting scenes, and phallus). Human bodies were also visually elaborated, by being decorated with standard motifs applied by *pintaderas*, represented in portable and parietal art, and accompanied – in death – by grave goods. Furthermore, distinctive new geometric motifs now began to appear in different cultural domains, as distinctive symbols. The spiral, for example, is found on the walls of the Grotta dei Cervi and Grotta Cosma, on Serra d'Alto style painted fine-ware and on *pintaderas* (Graziosi 1973, 96–7).

These developments in visual culture might be regarded as closely integrated aspects of the later Neolithic social world. In particular, they *might* be explained, on the one hand, as elements of a new set of more carefully controlled religious beliefs, symbols, and ceremonial practices (including rites focusing on fertility, initiation, death, and water); and, on the other hand, as valuable elements of more carefully structured forms of socio-economic exchange and display mobilised by age, gender, and kin-based groups in an increasingly interactive and competitive Central Mediterranean world (cf. Skeates 1993; 1994; 1998; Robb 1994). The wall paintings of the Grotta dei Cervi, for example, might be interpreted as specifically male representations of a mythical world, with a possible symbolic focus on deer hunting and supernatural interventions in the human world, which accompanied the performance of communal fertility rites in the most accessible parts of the cave system and secret male initiation rites in the deepest parts (cf. Whitehouse 1992, 87–124; Skeates 1994, 206–9).

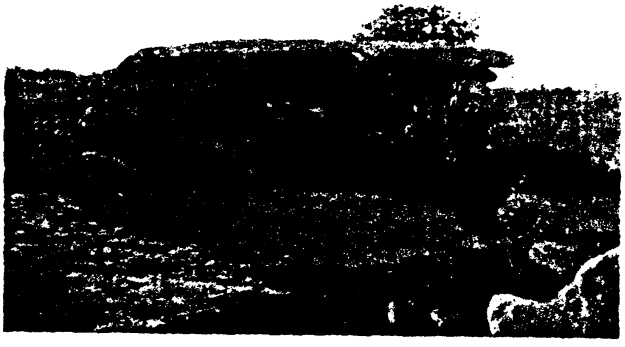

Fig. 8
Copper–Bronze Age dolmen at Giurdignano. After Malagrino (1982, fig. 46)

Copper and Bronze Ages

The full Copper Age (or 'Eneolithic') and Bronze Age date to between around 3700 cal BC and 1000 cal BC (cf. Azzi *et al.* 1977, 169). Period specialists will find it indecent that I have 'lumped together' these two major periods and their various sub-phases, but I would argue that similar long-term cultural and visual processes occurred throughout them, characterised by a continued growth in socio-economic interaction, differentiation and competition. Numerous archaeological remains found throughout the Lecce province can be assigned to this phase. They include open settlement sites (such Masseria Spigolizzi near Presicce), and cave sites (such as Grotta Cappuccini near Galatone), together with some less securely dated megalithic monuments and a rock-engraving site (at Santa Maria al Bagno near Nardò) (see, for example: Drago 1952; 1954–5; Palumbo 1956; Minellono 1961; Cremonesi 1985–6, 423–4; 1987–8, 420; Ingravallo & Piccinno 1985).

Elements of the material and visual culture of this period again show signs of continuity and change. At the settlement sites, evidence of wooden framed wattle-and-daub huts now occurs, as well as hearths. Assemblages of stone and bone artefacts, and of faunal remains, exhibit a familiar restricted range of types. Spindle whorls appear again, but in greater quantities. Finewares continued to evolve, through successive styles known as Eneolithic 'Cellino S. Marco', Early Bronze Age 'Capo Graziano', Middle Bronze Age 'Apennine' (with its characteristic expanding handles), Late Bronze Age 'Sub-Apennine', and Final Bronze Age 'Protovillanovan'. Some

inspiration for these styles may have been derived from metal vessels, particularly in the case of the dark burnished ware vessels decorated with point impressions and incised lines. Sherds thought to be of Mycenean origin also occur at sites such as Masseria Vecchia near Parabita (Ciongoli 1984, 386).

But the most striking developments appear at the ritual sites. At Grotta Cappuccini, for example, rich Eneolithic mortuary deposits were identified, particularly towards the interior of the cave. They comprised: disarticulated human bones, some of which were cremated; animal bones; ceramics; chipped stone artefacts of flint and obsidian (including some semi-lunate projectile points); some fragments of metal, including three dagger blades (one measuring 180 mm long); whetstones, including a 260 mm long sandstone rod; a small flat stone whose surface was smeared with red ochre; and numerous small beads and pendants (Cremonesi 1984, 387; 1985–6, 423–4; 1987–8, 420).

Megalithic monuments, including menhirs, dolmens, and tumulus tombs, were also erected across the landscape. The menhirs, which are mainly distributed across the eastern half of the Salento peninsula, are slender standing stones, which measure between 1.3 and 4.7 m in height (Drago 1952;

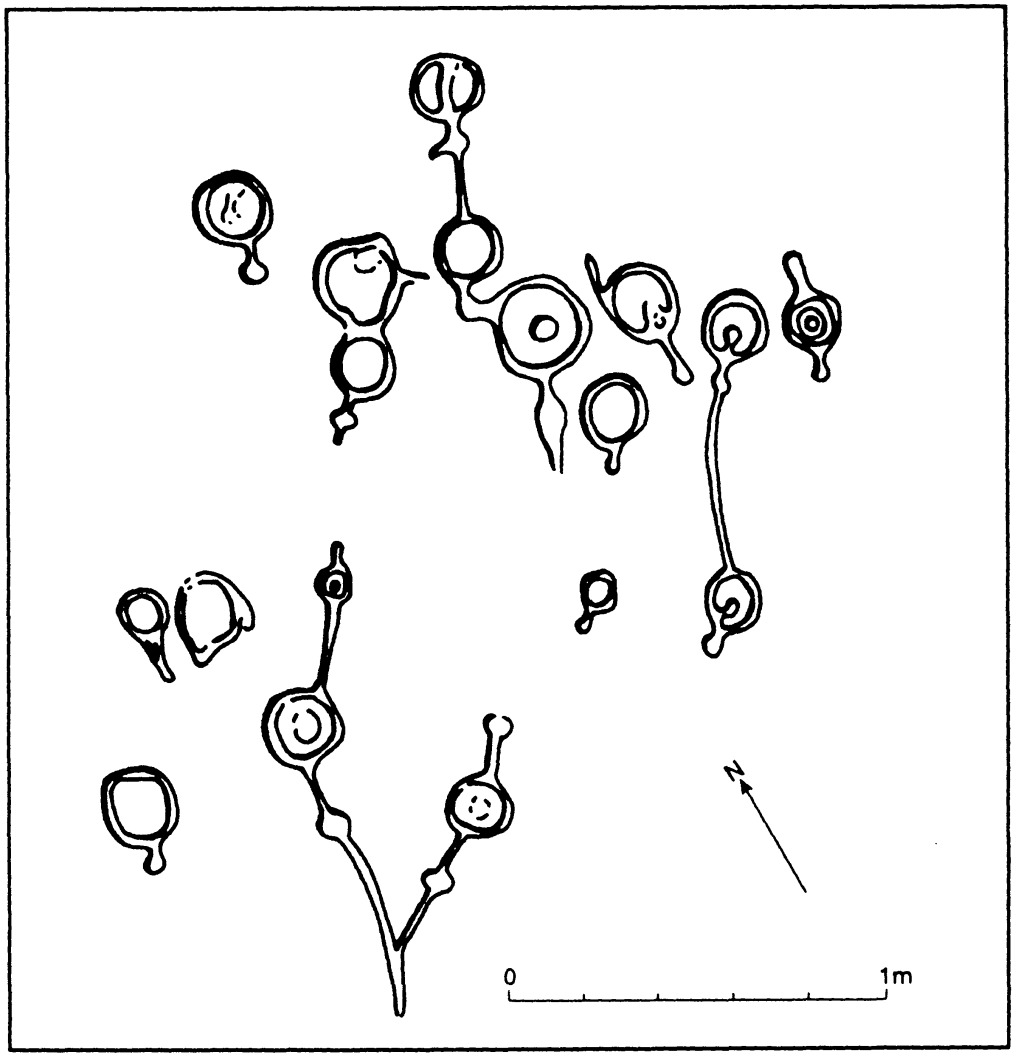

Fig. 9
Bronze Age(?) rock-engravings at Santa Maria al Bagno. After Minellono (1961, fig. 1). (Redrawn by Yvonne Beadnell)

Palumbo 1955). The dolmens are found in two groups, around Lecce in the middle of the Salento peninsula and around Otranto in the south (Palumbo 1956) (Fig. 8). Their chambers measure between 0.76 and 1.1 m in height, and are formed by a capstone resting on between three and nine vertically set slabs of local limestone. The tumulus tombs are more widely distributed (Drago 1954–5). Beneath mounds measuring between about 14 and 24 m in diameter, and about 2 m in height, they comprise a central burial chamber, lined by stone slabs, which is reached via a small access corridor, flanked by walls. They occasionally contain fragmented human bones, as well as ceramics (including black burnished ware handled cups and bowls, and black painted figulina) and a few bronze fibulae (used as clothing pins). A rock-engraving site identified at Santa Maria al Bagno may also date to the Bronze Age (Minellono 1961) (Fig. 9). The engravings are located in groups on some limestone outcrops on a coastal hill. They comprise circles (or 'cup-marks'), measuring between 110 and 300 mm in diameter and between 5 and 40 mm in depth; single or bifurcating small channels; and round hollows. These are sometimes connected to one another. They exhibit a regular orientation, with all of the small channels running down-slope towards the sea, which suggests that part of their use may have been to channel liquids.

Considered as a whole, continuity is again present in those traditional elements of material and visual culture most closely related to subsistence requirements (including flint and bone artefacts, faunal remains and some ceramic types) and bodily display (including some ornaments and red ochre). But otherwise, this period saw the continued transformation and elaboration of the visual culture of the Later Neolithic. Portable elements of material and visual culture continued to be elaborated (technically, visually and conceptually) and consumed in more conspicuous ritual deposits, including new types stone and metal weapons and new styles of ceramic vessels. The scale of body decoration may also have increased, with numerous small beads and pendants being displayed in the earlier part of the period, and new bronze fibulae appearing later on, attached to clothing. But, above all, human groups now exerted a much greater cultural control and visual impact on their landscape, through the laborious construction of a range of alternative performative spaces. These included: more established settlements for the living; megalithic monuments for the ancestors, whose exteriors were highly visible but access to whose concealed interiors may have been socially restricted (cf. Thomas 1993); and more secretive burial caves and rock-art sites, to which social access may also have been restricted (cf. Bradley 1997). These developments in visual culture *might* again be explained with reference to the contemporary social world, in which art and architecture were embedded and mobilised as expressive elements of a presumably more complex set of religious beliefs, practices and symbols, and as valuable and more overt elements of socio-economic production, exchange and display in an even more expansive and competitive Central Mediterranean world (cf. Renfrew 1986).

CONCLUSIONS

Through this case-study, I have tried to demonstrate four general points. First, that human experience is highly visual. Second, that art is deeply embedded in the inter-connected domains of human biology, the 'natural' world, subsistence economies, technology, and social practices. Third, that art can play an active role in human mental and cultural processes. And fourth, that the approach of visual culture complements that of interpretative archaeology. More specifically, I have also tried to draw out some diachronic and synchronic patterns that are of relevance to the on-going study of social dynamics in central Mediterranean prehistory.

Over time, innovations in the technology and style of art took place, which were structurally embedded in historically-specific biological and cultural processes. During the Middle Palaeolithic, Neanderthal groups probably shared a general visual culture, based upon features such as the style of their artefacts, the monumentality of their caves and the expressiveness of their bodies. However, there is no convincing evidence that they produced art objects specifically intended to be visually expressive and stimulating. These appear in the Early Upper Palaeolithic, in the form of a few shell ornaments and fragments of red ochre, which may have comprised elements of body decoration. Members of more communicative human groups, who sought greater bodily expression in performative contexts, might have used this new art-form. During the Middle and Late Upper Palaeolithic, the human body became an even more visible focus

for artistic expression in life and death, together with an expanded range of special purpose bone tools, new art objects, and the continued use of red ochre. Ritual performances in ancestral cave-sites may have made particular use of these symbolically charged elements of visual culture, particularly to focus the attention of participants on problems such as fertility and death. Similar ritual concerns appear to be reflected in the use of art in the Final Upper Palaeolithic, but on a larger scale and with a more explicit visual emphasis upon large game animals. This may represent the 'Romanellian' culture's attempt to cope with a changing physical and social world, related to the submergence of the Adriatic coastal plain, and the need to maintain connections between social groups at a time of increasing sedentism and separation. The visual culture of the earliest Neolithic, which maintains some traditional elements, rejects others and incorporates new ones, may also have played a similar social role. The widespread use of pottery vessels decorated in a widely shared style, for example, may have helped members of increasingly sedentary agricultural communities to maintain networks of socio-economic connections, particularly during special performances in which they could have highlighted visually the importance of food sharing. The later Neolithic then saw a significant elaboration of visual culture, across various cultural domains, with: wall paintings and overtly ritual deposits in caves; portable artefacts made in new sizes, shapes, materials, and decorative styles; human bodies ornamented and represented in new ways; and distinctive geometric symbols appearing in all of these domains. These elements of visual culture might have formed part of a new set of more carefully controlled religious beliefs, symbols and ceremonial practices, and also part of more carefully structured forms of socio-economic exchange and display mobilised in an increasingly interactive, differentiated and competitive Central Mediterranean world. Similar developments followed in the Copper and Bronze Ages, for similar reasons, but on a more conspicuous scale, and with social groups now exerting a much greater architectural and artistic impact on their landscape, through the construction of alternative performative spaces.

Long-term continuities are also evident in the use of specific artistic materials, motifs and styles. There is, for example, a long-lasting preference for abstract geometric motifs in the prehistoric art of the Lecce province, as opposed to explicit representations of the human body or of animals, which are only rarely revealed in ritual contexts. (This does not mean that the prehistoric art of south-east Italy should be dismissed as visually uninteresting, compared to the more figurative art of the Palaeolithic in the Franco-Cantabrian region or the Neolithic in south-east Europe, which tend to be more easily assimilated within European preconceptions of fine art – cf. Berger 1972.) Ruth Whitehouse (1996) has also claimed that certain artefact types and representations, such as decorated pebbles and bird-headed figures, continued across the classic Palaeolithic–Neolithic divide in southern Italy and Sicily. However, it is easy to over-emphasise the cultural significance of any such long-term continuities. At a basic level, they may simply reflect a tendency of the human brain and eye to favour particular geometric 'entoptic' images (Lewis Williams & Dowson 1988). They may also reflect the unconscious re-use of common elements of the material world for artistic expression and material metaphors, including caves, human bodies and remains, animals and their bones, woven plant fibres, and shells and pebbles (cf. Tilley 1998). In only one case – the use of red ochre as a pigment associated with ritual practices in caves – do I feel more confident that we are dealing specifically with a culturally determined (ie, learnt) art-form that was maintained as a traditional ritual symbol throughout prehistory.

More generally, I have suggested that visual culture may have helped human groups to deal with problems in subsistence and society, including environmental changes affecting the cultural landscape and its resources, and the breaking up of old social relations and the establishment and maintenance of new ones. The latter helps us to understand why close stylistic connections often existed between the art of the Salento peninsula and that of different regions in the Central Mediterranean zone and beyond. This is not a theme that I have focused on in my case study, since the relevant excavation reports usually provide a detailed tracing of stylistic parallels for any art-works, although it is one that I shall consider more fully in future work. But what is striking is that long-distance parallels can be found for almost all of the art in all the periods. This suggests that artistic creativity generally took place within a pool of artistic knowledge that valued conformity and emulation more than isolated individuality. I have also suggested that art was increasingly related to the expression of religious and even mythical beliefs, and in particular

to the performance of ceremonies and rituals in selected spaces (cf. Pluciennik 1994, 63). More specifically, what we may be dealing with is a long-term tradition of performance art in prehistory, involving performers and viewers, in which art (ranging from portable artefacts to monumental architecture) helped to structure and heighten the sensual and social impact of the acting human body.

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